Barack Obama and the Paradox of Racial (In)Civility

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On three occasions in his political career to date, Barack Obama has been called to address crisis in the form of racial unrest: during the 2008 presidential campaign in a speech titled "A More Perfect Union," in 2013 following the verdict in the Trayvon Martin case, and after the 2014 grand jury decision in the Michael Brown case in Ferguson, Missouri. While most scholars credit Obama with an inclusive rhetorical strategy that ties Americans to shared values, analysis of Obama's three racial moment speeches reveals his preference to contextualize race paradoxically, thus creating a type of disunity. In the context of civic controversy, I argue Obama's use of paradox is fundamentally metaphorical and serves an important pedagogical function, which is to invite citizens to partake in what Michael Mendelson calls controversia, the process whereby speakers present both pro and contra reasoning within one complex argument to establish the grounds for deliberation. While this strategy may have contributed to Obama's success in "A More Perfect Union" and in the Trayvon Martin speech, news media deemed his response to Michael Brown a failure. The success and failure of each speech, I argue, hinged primarily on the constraints surrounding each speaking occasion and its intended audience.

Keywords: Barack Obama, civic controversy, metaphor, paradox, pedagogy

On August 27, 2014, Georgetown University professor of history Marcia Chatelain geared up for the upcoming school year. In the wake of national unrest following the grand jury acquittal of Darren Wilson, the police officer who shot and killed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, Chatelain contemplated how to address the controversy in her own classroom. She knew Ferguson posed a significant pedagogical problem for educators at all levels, which prompted her to start a Twitter campaign under the hashtag #FergusonSyllabus. The goal was simple: reach out to educators on social media and urge them to commit to talking about Ferguson on the first day of class. "I wanted to help other professors find a way to talk about this tragedy," Chatelain notes, and "[discuss] how it would affect our students' first day of school."[1]

As chief executive Barack Obama encountered a similar problem in the aftermath of Ferguson. The trial outcome forced Obama to devise a strategy to publicly address controversy steeped in claims of racism. Additionally, while Obama's candidacy prompted America to reexamine the status of racial equality,[2] his swift ascent to the highest office in the land led many news media outlets to proclaim the arrival of a post-racial twenty-first century.[3] The problem, Michael Lacy and Kent Ono point out, is that the discourse of post-racism presents the illusion of progress while significant disparities still exist.[4] Unfortunately the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael

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[1] Marcia Chatelain, interview by Georgetown College, August 27, 2014.
[2] Michael Tesler and David O. Sears, *Obama's Race: The 2008 Election and the Dream of a Post-Racial America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).
[3] Shelby Steele, "Obama's Post-Racial Promise," *LA Times*, November 5, 2008; Robin Kelley, "President-Elect Barack Obama: A Postracial President Who Should Focus the Country on Race," *US News and World Report*, November 5, 2008; John McWhorter, "Racism in America is Over," *Forbes Magazine*, December 30, 2008.
[4] Michael Lacy and Kent Ono, eds., *Critical Rhetorics of Race* (New York: NYU Press, 2011).

Brown, and more recently Walter Scott and Freddie Gray, demonstrate this case in point and remind us of the persistence of racial inequality today, more than a half-century after the era of civil rights.

Michael Brown was not the first time racial conflict summoned Obama to respond publicly. In fact a similar exigence manifested for Obama on two earlier occasions: in his "A More Perfect Union" speech during the 2008 presidential campaign, and more recently following the ruling in the George Zimmerman verdict in 2013. A close reading of metaphors when Obama addresses race sensitive topics, reveals his preference to contextualize race through deployment of light and dark imagery—a central feature Michael Osborn ascribes to archetypes in his seminal essay, "Archetypal Metaphor in Rhetoric: The Light-Dark Family."[5] Binary characterizations of racial conflict in Obama's speeches manifest in the form of paradox, as Obama simultaneously validates oppositional sentiment that exists between the races. This strategy has the potential to exacerbate racial tension by putting conflicting perspectives on race in competition with each other.

Most news media and scholarship on Obama recognize his ability to unite America with an inclusive[6] rhetorical strategy, one that transcends the division of identity politics and crosses party and demographic lines.[7] Examination of Obama's speeches delivered to the American public following events that provoked racial unrest, however, illustrates divergence from such an approach. How, then, does Obama's approach to addressing racial conflict differ from his strategy in other speeches, and what does this say about his preferred rhetorical strategy more generally? Rather than attempt to reconcile racial differences and tie Americans to shared values, Obama puts racial sentiment in direct opposition. While Obama uses these moments to illuminate the existence of racial incivility, doing so has the potential to provoke civilized discussions to help America confront and interrogate its racial differences. This strategy, I argue, has important pedagogical value. Obama's deployment of paradox to contextualize racial sentiment is fundamentally metaphorical, but it manifests a rhetorical catalyst for America to participate in the act of controversia, the process in which speakers present and interrogate pro and contra reasoning simultaneously to establish the basis for deliberation.[8] As such, Obama's racial moment speeches contain within them the possibility for candid discussions about racism to transpire, even while many pundits continue to indict the Obama administration for failing to improve conditions between the races.[9]

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[5] Michael Osborn, "Archetypal Metaphor in Rhetoric: The Light-Dark Family," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 50, no. 3 (1967): 115-126.

[6] For the purpose of this essay, I use the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of "inclusive" as "Not excluding any section of society or any party involved in something."

[7] See Adam Nagourney, "Obama Takes Iowa in a Big Turnout as Clinton Falters," *New York Times*, January 4, 2008; Scott Helman, "Obama Wins Racially Polarized Mississippi," *Boston Globe*, March 11, 2008. Also James Darsey, "Barack Obama and America's Journey," *Southern Journal of Communication* 74, no. 1 (2009): 88-103; Robert C. Rowland and John M. Jones, "Recasting the American Dream and America's Politics: Barack Obama's Keynote Address to the 2004 Democratic National Convention," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 93, no. 4 (2007): 425-448.

[8] Michael Mendelson, "Everything Must be Argued: Rhetorical Theory and Pedagogical Practice in Cicero's *De Oratore*," *Journal of Education* 179, no. 1 (1997): 15-47.

[9] See George E. Condon Jr. and Jim O'Sullivan, "Has President Obama Done Enough for Black Americans," *The Atlantic*, April 5, 2013; Dennis Prager, "The Only Question is Whether it can Ever be Undone," *National Review*, October 29, 2013; Christopher Lamb, "Don't Blame Obama if Race Relations are Worse During His Presidency," *Huffington Post*, December 23, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/christopher-lamb/dont-blame-obama-if-race-relations-are-worse-during-his-presidency_b_6356746.html.

In what follows, I first provide a review of literature that highlights Obama's use of metaphor and the inclusive nature of his discourse. I then offer a brief discussion of the context surrounding each speaking occasion and its intended audience. I continue by outlining a methodological approach that bridges paradox with metaphor as a framework to confront civic controversy. I follow with analysis of Obama's "A More Perfect Union" and Trayvon Martin speeches to demonstrate his departure from what most scholars consider a unifying approach, and show how the speeches reveal a pedagogical capacity for controversia. I conclude by discussing Obama's response to Michael Brown, and explain how Wilson's status as a representative of the Ferguson police force impeded his metaphorical and pedagogical approach.

Metaphorical Transcendence in Obama's Discourse

Critical assessments on Obama reveal his preference to use metaphor to unite a racially and otherwise divided America. For example, James Darsey argues Obama in his 2008 campaign speeches uses the metaphor of a journey to project an experience relating to all Americans. Obama's success, Darsey maintains, centers on the ability to bring his personal journey and America's national journey into one confluent trajectory.[10] In the same vein as Darsey, Robert Rowland and John Jones argue that Obama's discourse, through a metaphor of hope, balances communal and individual values, which makes the American Dream more attainable for all Americans.[11] David Frank alludes to the archetypal significance of Obama's prose without labeling it as such. He notes Obama's first inaugural begins and ends with references to the weather, as Obama associates the storms and freezing temperatures of his inauguration day with the country's current condition regarding religious tolerance.[12] To help the audience move beyond its "childish" attitudes about religion, Obama employs juxtaposition and a multifaceted conception of religion that appeals to a diverse audience with differing beliefs and values.[13] Although these scholars converge in the belief that Obama deploys metaphor to unite listeners, I provide a contrary perspective. I agree that metaphor is central to Obama's success, but my reading of his racial moment speeches demonstrates the ways in which Obama uses metaphor not to unite Americans in shared values but to divide listeners on the basis of oppositional sentiment concerning racial inequality.

While not all scholarship on Obama is metaphorical, most literature acknowledges his attempt to unify America. For Robert Terrill, Obama creates unity in his "A More Perfect Union" speech through the embodiment of double consciousness, a Duboisian precept that invites listeners to view themselves through the perspective of others. This strategy enables Americans to invoke the Golden Rule and allows them to "find that common stake we all have in one another."[14] David Frank and Mark McPhail acknowledge Obama's attempt to cultivate racial reconciliation.[15] Although Frank argues Obama links minority and identity groups to shared American val-

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[10] Darsey, "Barack Obama and America's Journey," 89.

[11] Rowland and Jones, "Recasting the American Dream and America's Politics."

[12] David Frank, "Obama's Rhetorical Signature: Cosmopolitan Civil Religion in the Presidential Inaugural Address, January 20, 2009," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 14, no. 4 (2011): 605-630, 623.

[13] Frank, "Obama's Rhetorical Signature," 619.

[14] Robert Terrill, "Unity and Duality in Barack Obama's 'A More Perfect Union,'" *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 95, no. 4 (2009): 363-386.

[15] David A. Frank and Mark Lawrence McPhail, "Barack Obama's Address to the 2004 Democratic National Convention: Trauma, Compromise, Consilience, and the (Im)Possibility of Racial Reconciliation," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 8, no. 4 (2005): 571-93.

ues, McPhail reveals Obama's discourse of whiteness and its dominant rhetorical tropes: innocence, race neutrality, and positive self-presentation. This reality, for McPhail, hinders any possibility for reconciliation. Judy Isaksen concurs about Obama's attempt to unite a racially divided nation. She explains that Obama occupies a middle-of-the-road spot that transcends the "bipolar problem" and puts forth a new position that "calmly" but "substantively" confronts racial progress.[16] In the same vein as the existing scholarship, I hold that racial reconciliation is Obama's paramount task. My analysis, however, extends the literature to show how reconciliation originates in Obama's ability to partition America across racial lines rather than his attempt to help listeners transcend their racial differences.

A close reading of Obama's metaphors in his three racial moment speeches provides an alternative interpretation for his use of metaphor and his rhetorical strategy more generally. While most critiques acknowledge the inclusionary nature of Obama's rhetoric, they resign his metaphors to the symbolic realm. Even Darsey acknowledges America's journey to equality functions better in aspirational than actual terms, when he notes the "finish line" is metaphorical.[17] I take the argument advanced by most scholars and invert it to show how Obama's deployment of metaphor, through a sustained use of paradox, is alienating rather than inclusive. Rather than attempt to unite listeners in racial acknowledgement, Obama accentuates America's racial differences and places racial sentiment in opposition. A cursory reading of Obama's speeches illuminates this strategy but does not demonstrate its full significance. While these speeches may seem at first glance divisive, this approach, I argue, has pedagogical value. Grounded in metaphor, this strategy holds the potential to transcend the symbolic realm and its figurative limitations as a rhetorical catalyst that invites listeners to engage in controversia. Understanding the constraints and audience surrounding each speaking occasion helps bring these observations to light.

Three Racial Moments

In early March of 2008, Barack Obama encountered his most critical campaign exigency to date, Reverend Jeremiah Wright of Chicago's Trinity United Church of Christ. Wright, Obama's pastor and friend of more than two decades, had recently become the center of a media spectacle for comments that many deemed unpatriotic and anti-American. As snippets of Wright excoriating a "white America" and the "US of KKKA" circulated endlessly on social media, Obama's association with the pastor made national headlines.[18] According to Clarence Walker and Gregory Smithers, the connection to Wright threatened to derail Obama's presidential bid, and Obama's chief strategist, David Axelrod, recognized that Wright attenuated Obama's "well-cultivated post-racial image."[19] Others corroborated Axelrod's observation and noted that Trinity emphasized Obama's "blackness."[20] Voters showed a similar concern, and in many instances Wright's statements alarmed Americans. Democrats feared Obama's connection to Wright would cost him the election,[21] and many acknowledged the pastor seemed "a world away from the calm and con-

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[16] Judy Isaksen, "Obama's Rhetorical Shift: Insights for Communication Studies," *Communication Studies* 62, no. 4 (2011): 457, 468.

[17] Darsey, "Barack Obama and America's Journey," 100.

[18] Jodi Kantor. "The Wright Controversy," *The New York Times*, November 8, 2008.

[19] Clarence Walker and Gregory Smithers, *The Preacher and the Pulpit: Jeremiah Wright, Barack Obama, and Rave in America* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 53.

[20] Tesler and Sears, *Obama's Race*, 4.

[21] Rahiel Tesfamariam, "Jeremiah Wright's Resurrection," *The Washington Post*, May 18, 2012; Ishmael Reed, *Barack Obama and the Jim Crow Media* (Montreal: Baraka Books, 2010).

siderate image that Obama . . . presents."[22] Jeremiah Wright, as such, prompted America to reconsider its investment in Obama and question his ethos as a presidential candidate.

If "A More Perfect Union" was Obama's response to a situation that called into question his own credibility, thus reflecting an inward rhetorical challenge, his comments following the Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown rulings manifested in the need to address an outward but not always visible problem: racial injustice. That is not to say Obama did not use Wright as a platform to discuss the status of race relations in America; he did. Rather, the Wright issue posed a direct threat to Obama's electability, while Brown and Martin were indicative of the status of race relations in America more generally.

The acquittals of George Zimmerman and Darren Wilson, the two individuals responsible for killing Martin and Brown respectively, continue to fuel the debate surrounding racial profiling and racial injustice in America in the twenty-first century.[23] Zimmerman, a private citizen moonlighting as a neighborhood watch volunteer, and Darren Wilson, an officer on the Ferguson police force, both claimed to react in self-defense and were acquitted of the charges brought against them. One problem, Jamelle Bouie explains, centers on the inclination to stereotype African American males as criminals. "When people see black men, they think crime," Bouie notes, and "that cognitive link is so strong that some people will create 'proof' to justify the association."[24] "Rather than treat Trayvon Martin or Michael Brown as typical teenagers turned victims," he explains, "they'll work to dismiss them as 'thugs.'"[25] When this type of sentiment prevails, it is not surprising to see outcomes similar to the Martin and Brown verdicts.

Although the manifestation of "thug" rationale had the potential to influence trial outcomes, more important is Obama's response to each incident. While Florida summoned Obama to respond to the acts of a private citizen, Ferguson called on Obama to address not only the actions of one individual, Officer Darren Wilson, but the entire public institution of the Ferguson Police Department. Wilson can then be viewed as a synecdoche for the entire Ferguson police force, which is a synecdoche for police departments nationwide. Since Wilson's actions could have manifested in a similar fashion for any officer in any city in the country, Ferguson put more at stake for Obama and required a different response.

What is most important about the Ferguson speech is how it demonstrates the limitations of Obama's rhetorical approach. Because Brown required Obama to address the acts of a public institution, the Ferguson police force, the audience for and message of the speech differed significantly. "A More Perfect Union" and Trayvon Martin allowed Obama to use metaphor to first divide America along racial lines, and then provide listeners the means to engage in controversia, and thereby confront and interrogate their racial differences. Obama used Ferguson, however, to address a different audience: protestors in Missouri and across the nation. While Obama could have treated Ferguson in a similar manner as the other two speeches, his divergence freed him from the constraints of criticizing a public institution and condemning in a broader sense the white patriarchal system of which he is part. A brief discussion of metaphor clarifies why paradox is amenable to certain situations and not others.

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[22] David Broder, "The Real Value of Obama's Speech," *The Washington Post*, March 23, 2008.

[23] Peter Dreier, "Cold Anger in Restless Times: The Growing Movement for Racial and Social Justice," *Huffingtonpost.com*, September 6, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/peter-dreier/the-growing-movement-for-racial-and-social-justice_b_6280412.html.

[24] Jamelle Bouie, "The New Racism," *Slate.com*, September 5, 2014, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2014/09/the_new_racism_michael_brown_and_trayvon_martin_deny_it_exists_and_smear.html.

[25] Bouie, "The New Racism."

The Paradox of Racial (In)Civility

Metaphors are regarded as indispensable devices for politicians who want to convey persuasive messages. By drawing analogies and avoiding the central argument route, politicians can manage the impression they make on the audience.[26] Obama has been called to shape America's awareness about racial inequality at three distinct moments in his political career; on two of those occasions he turned to metaphor. In "A More Perfect Union" and after the ruling in the George Zimmerman case Obama demonstrates a preference to contextualize racial controversy in dualistic form, through paradox, while he digresses from this strategy in his speech following Brown. Such bifurcations resonate with Michael Osborn's work with archetypes.

As Osborn reminds us, rhetors often place archetypes at critical moments within a speech.[27] They establish mood and perspective in the introduction, reinforce critical arguments in the body, and synthesize meaning in the conclusion.[28] Obama's deployment of paradox in his racial moment speeches affirms this characteristic: it appears in the proem, the narration, and epilogue of each speech. Taken together, the discourse collectively begins to define Obama's political career in archetypal terms with regard to race; he was called to address race during his candidacy, and at two times throughout his second term race has surmounted an inescapable exigency.

Archetypes are grounded in depth experience, such as our susceptibility to light and darkness, our orientation in space, family relationships, or profoundly important and vivid experiences such as war, disease, or travel on the sea.[29] Because of their strong positive and negative associations with development motives, they express value judgments with the potential to elicit a wide value response from audiences.[30] For example, in "A More Perfect Union," Obama solicits value judgments in his binary portrayal of Wright and Trinity. In the absence of a definitive statement, listeners must decide whether to affirm Wright "the saint" or "the demagogue" and "the kindness and cruelty" that reside equally in the congregation. Obama casts light and darkness here as the good and evil he claims both Wright and Trinity embody.

One central feature Osborn attributes to archetypes is the metaphor's ability to manifest a problem/solution. When light and dark images are used concurrently, Osborn explains, they underscore the "simplistic, two-valued, black-white attitudes" which rhetors and listeners prefer.[31] The preferred situation or outcome a speaker casts upon the audience, he notes, always involves the "acquisition of an attitude or the adoption of a solution."[32] While "the present situation is darker than midnight," Osborn holds, "the speaker's solutions will bring the dawn."[33] Although metaphors are typically viewed as abstract constructions, Obama's racial moment speeches demonstrate the ways in which archetypes can be used to make nonfigurative associations. There is no inherent solution in Obama's literal construction, however, since both sides are equally valid, which renders the archetype alone inadequate to resolve its fundamental problem, that of

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[26] Christ'l De Landtsheer, Philippe De Vries, and Dieter Vertessen, "Political Impression Management: How Metaphors, Sound Bites, Appearance Effectiveness, and Personality Traits Can Win Elections," *Journal of Political Marketing* 7, no. 3 (2008): 217-238.

[27] Michael Osborn, "The Trajectory of My Work with Metaphor," *Southern Communication Journal* 74, no. 1 (2009): 81.

[28] Osborn, "Archetypal Metaphor in Rhetoric," 117.

[29] Osborn, "Trajectory," 81.

[30] Osborn, "Archetypal Metaphor in Rhetoric," 117.

[31] Osborn, "Archetypal Metaphor in Rhetoric," 117.

[32] Osborn, "Archetypal Metaphor in Rhetoric," 118.

[33] Osborn, "Archetypal Metaphor in Rhetoric," 117.

lightness and darkness. The binary, which remains unresolved, thus creates the necessary conditions for deliberation.

In the context of civic controversy Obama's use of metaphor can facilitate *dissoi logoi*, the act of arguing both sides of a contested issue. According to Michael Mendelson, antilogic, presenting two sides of a controversy with different outcomes, allows speakers to provide both pro and contra reasoning within one complex argument. Mendelson refers to this dialogical approach as controversia. "[C]*ontroversia* [emphasis original]," he explains, "proceeds by placing multiple claims in juxtaposition and then by negotiating the conflicts among them."[34] "[I]n the realm of rhetoric and for the purpose of argument," Mendelson asserts, "no position is sacrosanct, everything must be argued for there are always two sides . . . [and] we should always . . . examine both."[35] For Obama, the juxtaposition of competing worldviews with regard to race is represented best through the use paradox and archetypal language. This dialogical approach that Obama adopts originates in classical rhetorical theory that dates back more than two thousand years to Cicero and Quintilian.

In *De Oratore*, Cicero attempts to "draw out and give shape to" disputed topics by structuring inquiry in utramque partem. This process, Mendelson explains, presents "a dialogue among various speakers with opposing views who—in the process of give and take, defense and rebuttal, revision and response—provide for the dynamic interplay of *multiplex ratio* [emphasis original]."[36] This practice, conceived as controversia in Rome and antilogic by the ancient Greeks, is a Sophistic approach to argumentation that is at the heart of Quintilian's pedagogy.[37] Quintilian, like Cicero, believed all claims must be argued since more than one position is always likely, that judgment is best deferred in the presentation of alternative arguments, and that judgments arise from the evaluation of multiple opinions.[38] It is this spirit of "friendly contradiction" which is central to both pedagogical approaches. If the goal of controversia is to discover the possible basis for cooperative action, it comes as no surprise that Obama prefers this style of oratory to more dialectical routes. By accentuating incivility that exists between the races, Obama provides a foundation for America to engage in civil discourse. Viewed this way, analysis of Obama's racial moment speeches challenges the common assertion that resigns his metaphors to the realm of the figurative. Although Obama's use of metaphor can be viewed symbolically, it should not stop there. In Obama's racial moment speeches, I hold, metaphor has the potential to transcend the symbolic realm as a catalyst for America to engage in a spirited conversation about the status of racial inequality.

Obama's Pedagogical Approach to Racial Conflict

On March 18, 2008, from the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Obama addressed the Jeremiah Wright controversy in a speech titled "A More Perfect Union."[39] In the speech, Obama utilizes light and dark imagery through continued deployment of paradox and contradiction. This rhetorical strategy is recognizable when Obama invokes his own story,

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[34] Michael Mendelson, "Quintilian and the Pedagogy of Argument," *Argumentation* 15, no. 3 (2001): 278.

[35] Mendelson, "Everything Must be Argued," 16.

[36] Mendelson, "Everything Must be Argued," 20.

[37] Mendelson, "Quintilian."

[38] Mendelson, "Quintilian," 278.

[39] Barack Obama, "A More Perfect Union," March 18, 2008, *AmericanRhetoric.com*, http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/barackobamaperfectunion.htm. Future references to the speech will be made parenthetically by page number.

discusses Wright, and comments on Wright's home congregation, Trinity United Church of Christ. In any case, Obama presents listeners a comprehensive picture that includes the good and the bad, the familiar and foreign characteristics of Obama's narrative, Wright the pastor, and Trinity's congregation. In isolation such characterizations seem unrelated and irrelevant. When placed alongside each other, however, they reflect the light and dark comparisons intrinsic to archetypes. Early in the speech, Obama details the juxtaposition and contradictions within his own story:

> I'm the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a white grandfather who survived a Depression to serve in Patton's army during World War II, and a white grandmother who worked on a bomber assembly line at Fort Leavenworth while he was overseas. I've gone to some of the best schools in America and I've lived in one of the world's poorest nations. . . . [I]t's a story that has seared into my genetic makeup the idea that this nation is more than the sum of its parts—that out of many, we are truly one. (2)

Obama's use of synecdoche here shows listeners how their individual stories, like his own, are part of America's grand narrative. Implementation of the word "seared" conjures the fire characteristic that Osborn attributes to archetypes.[40] Osborn reminds us that fire represents both the positive/constructive and negative/destructive qualities that archetypes possess. Fire, on the one hand, can burn. On the other hand, fire has the potential to purify and can bring light and warmth to the darkest situations. In one sense, Obama's metaphor affirms Osborn's characterization in that it illustrates the productive quality of fire. In another sense, it challenges the notion that burning is destructive. While burning is typically viewed in the negative, sear, for Obama, represents something positive; it left a permanent reminder that America's strength resides in the diversity of its individuals. Obama's story is unique and contradictory. He has an African father and a mother from Kansas, a paradox essentially.[41] Although most listeners do not share this characteristic with Obama, every American is rife with paradox and contradiction. Collectively, these stories are unique and construct the social fabric of American culture.

Shortly after Obama outlines his own story he characterizes Wright in binary form. Obama asserts, "Did I know him [Wright] to be an occasionally fierce critic of American domestic and foreign policy? Of Course. Did I ever hear him make remarks that could be controversial while I sat in the church? Yes" (3). Obama then counters with an alternative perspective: "But the truth is, that isn't all that I know of the man. The man I met more than twenty years ago is a man who helped introduce me to my Christian faith, a man who spoke to me about our obligations to love one another, to care for the sick and lift up the poor" (3). Wright is essentially a juxtaposition; he is the good and the bad, the saint and the demagogue, the light and dark. For example, while news media characterized a white racist in 2008, Wright impacted his community in positive ways during his tenure at Trinity. In his capacity as senior pastor from 1972 to 2008, Wright delivered sermons that articulated tension and unrest in the African American community.[42] By 1986, he mentored more than a dozen young preachers through Trinity. In 1990, Trinity founder Reverend Kenneth B. Smith commended Wright's dynamic leadership as a reflection of the pride

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[40] Osborn, "Archetypal Metaphor in Rhetoric," 117.

[41] Although it may seem more appropriate to characterize Obama's biography as a perceived and rhetorically constructed incongruity, for the purpose of this example I use the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of paradox as "A situation, person, or thing that combines contradictory features or qualities."

[42] Brian K. Clardy, "Deconstructing a Theology of Defiance: Black Preaching and the Politics of Racial Identity," *Journal of Church and State* 53, no. 2 (2011): 203-221.

that people take in the church.[43] In 2008, however, Wright reminded America of the long road ahead on the journey to equality, and his comments reopened wounds thought by many to have healed over time.

Obama continues to describe the paradox of Trinity United. He explains, "Trinity embodies the black community in its entirety—the doctor and the welfare mom, the model student and the former gang banger" (4). For Obama, diversity makes the church that much more compelling. "The church contains in full," he claims, "the kindness and cruelty, the fierce intelligence and the shocking ignorance, the struggles and successes" (4). Even Wright, Obama contends, "contains within him the contradictions—the good and the bad—of the community that he has served diligently for so many years" (4). With both extremes represented, Trinity's congregation is a paradox that embodies lightness and darkness in full through the good and evil that, at times, can reside equally in the church.[44] Good people are capable of doing bad things, and people who sin attend church to repent and make themselves right in the eyes of God.

Metaphor helps Obama circumvent the limitations associated with a dialectical approach and bolster his pedagogical goal—to provoke a discussion about the status of racism in America in the twenty-first century. "Unlike dialectic," Mendelson reminds us, "*controversia* [emphasis original] proceeds by placing multiple claims in juxtaposition and then by negotiating the conflicts among them."[45] Rather than place a premium on the formal development of the claim, Obama prioritizes controversia for the exchange that transpires between interlocutors. Given the severity and the inflammatory nature of Wright's comments, Obama's choice not to excoriate Wright may seem odd initially. Doing so, however, would prevent listeners from interrogating the inherent tensions within Wright and Trinity. It is this interplay of conflicting realities that allows "the 'truth' [to] reveal itself in mixed form as a provisional agreement among the parties involved,"[46] the fundamental task for America.

A similar strategy surfaces in Obama's remarks on the verdict in the George Zimmerman case.[47] In response to the jury's acquittal of Zimmerman, Obama acknowledges simultaneously those who stand on both sides of the ruling without condemning either position. Although he begins with a statement to appease those upset with the trial outcome, Obama continues with remarks that validate the opposition. Obama explains, "The African American community is . . . knowledgeable that there is a history of racial disparities in the application of our criminal laws—everything from the death penalty to enforcement of our drug laws" (1). "And that ends up having an impact," he continues, "in terms of how people interpret the case" (1). Such statements resonate with populations that view the ruling as a breakdown in America's criminal justice system. Obama then presents an alternative interpretation: "Now, this isn't to say that the African American community is naïve about the fact that African American young men are disproportionately involved in the criminal justice system; that they are disproportionately both victims and perpetrators of violence" (2). Contra to his original statement regarding the outcome of the case, Obama's subsequent comments reaffirm the beliefs of those who saw Zimmerman's

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[43] Andrew Billingsley, *Mighty Like a River: The Black Church and Social Reform* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[44] It should be noted that good and evil exist as more than polar opposites. They embody the cyclical process inherent to archetypes such as the movement of day into night and the changing of the seasons.

[45] Mendelson, "Quintilian," 278.

[46] Mendelson, "Quintilian," 278.

[47] Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President on Trayvon Martin," July 19, 2013, *WhiteHouse.gov*, https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/07/19/remarks-president-trayvon-martin. Future references to the speech will be made by page number parenthetically.

actions as justified, that in fact he reacted and killed Martin in self-protection. Obama's attempt to placate both interest groups through contradictory statements renders the situation ambiguous and open to interpretation, an enthymeme with more than one, fixed conclusion.

The characterization of African American men as both victims and perpetrators of violence in response to the Zimmerman verdict echoes the paradoxical treatment of Wright and Trinity. In a similar vein that positions African Americans on both sides of violent crime, Wright in his sermons is responsible for diffusing and perpetuating racial unrest simultaneously. Although at times responsible for fanning the flames of hatred, Wright brings the community together in positive and constructive ways. As a synecdoche for his constituents, Wright embodies the contradictions of Trinity's members; he, like everyone else, in a metaphorical sense, can be the "doctor" and the "gang banger," the good and the evil, the lifeblood of the congregation in its entirety. Obama's choice to characterize each example in binary form represents a desire to survey "the diversity of opinion on the topic in order to weigh the probabilities on each side," a concept Quintilian advocated in his *Institutio Oratoria*.[48] Just as Quintilian challenged students to debate the efficacy of a public versus private education, Obama calls on America to interrogate the scope of racial controversy in its entirety.

Obama's deployment of paradox continues in his attempt to contextualize African American sentiment following the Zimmerman verdict. As he validates concerns, however, he simultaneously reinforces the opposition. Obama charges, "I think the African American community is . . . not naive in understanding that, statistically, somebody like Trayvon Martin was . . . more likely to be shot by a peer than he was by somebody else" (2). "But they get frustrated," he maintains, "if they feel that there's no context for it and that context is being denied. . . . I think to a sense that if a white male teen was involved in the same kind of scenario, that, from top to bottom, both the outcome and the aftermath might have been different" (2). In short, Obama first affirms the stereotype that renders African American men violent, but continues to expose the inherent bias in the criminal justice system that subordinates populations of color. The important point here is that Obama does not merely hold to one side. Instead, he implicates and excuses African Americans and the criminal justice system for their roles in the reaffirmation and subversion of racial inequality. A significant function of archetypes, Osborn reminds us, is their power to create double associations.[49] Obama, in this case, invites the audience to associate and he does the legwork for listeners. His acknowledgment of both perspectives makes it easy for listeners to relate on the basis of their individual experiences and worldviews. By juxtaposing one against the other, Obama validates each position in its own right and both sides are perfectly plausible in their own contexts.

The paradoxical quality of Obama's prose in "A More Perfect Union" and in response to the Martin ruling lends itself to the binary nature of archetypes. Whether explaining the contradictions inherent in Wright or Trinity, the divided sentiment of the Martin verdict, or the role of African American men in racial injustice, Obama presents each example dualistically to not favor one over the other. As Mendelson reminds us, universal logic and Truth are problematic from the point of controversia, especially when delivered by a person of authority, because this discourse tends to posit ideas as determinate when in actuality they are dynamic and bear contextual differences.[50] Viewed this way, Obama's tendency to portray the duality of each situation can be seen as an attempt to create identification with multiple interest groups. Identification, for Mendelson,

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[48] Mendelson, "Quintilian," 281.
[49] Osborn, "Archetypal Metaphor in Rhetoric," 117.
[50] Mendelson, "Everything Must be Argued," 32.

is central to controversia; it begins with the Ciceronian act "of narrowing the gap between speakers for the purpose of *conciliatio* [emphasis original]."[51] Because of their strong positive and negative associations with development motives, Osborn explains, archetypes express judgments with the potential to elicit varied responses from listeners with regard to values.[52] In his continued validation of opposing opinions, Obama succeeds in easing the tension at least temporarily, while failing, at the same time, to assign blame to a specific individual or institution, whether an isolated incident, as with Martin, or America's more turbulent history with regard to racism and inequality more generally. An extension of the pedagogy of Cicero and Quintilian, Obama's discourse helps us understand that everything must be argued because more than one probable position always exists, and that judgment is best surrendered until alternative arguments are weighed.

"A More Perfect Union" and his remarks following the acquittal of George Zimmerman were not the only times Obama encountered a pedagogical problem. Robert Rowland explains that Obama's health care reform plan required him to educate a confused America and divided Congress in 2010.[53] As Rowland points out, Obama's "reasoned" discourse subordinates pro and contra arguments to "stubborn facts," which ultimately failed to shift public opinion or persuade Republicans to work toward bipartisan reform. And "[a]lthough Obama achieved a measure of success in educating a portion of the American people," Rowland explains, "he did not succeed in producing authentic dialogue."[54] Given his failure with this strategy in 2010, it should come as no surprise that Obama abandoned a reasoned approach when called to address and educate America on racial inequality.

What is most striking about Obama's treatment of racial conflict in both speeches is how it challenges the notion of his discourse as inclusionary. News media largely commend Obama's depolarizing approach, one that seems to transcend the division of identity politics.[55] Most scholars sound a similar note. For example, Rowland and Jones attribute Obama's success to his ability to invoke American values of "inclusiveness, universality, progress, and empowerment."[56] They go on to say, Obama's appeal resides "not with metaphors of separation . . . but with a narrative based in shared identity as Americans."[57] Other scholars have gone so far as to label Obama the "people's interlocutor."[58] Viewed within the corpus of his political discourse, however, Obama's remarks in both speeches challenge this characterization, one that is ubiquitous among scholars and the news media alike. Rather than attempt to unify a racially divided America, Obama's rhetoric polarizes listeners across racial lines. Illustrating racial controversy in dichotomized form is, however, a strategic choice that enables Obama to validate the oppositional sentiment that exists among various groups, while it holds the possibility for Americans to partake in a healthy and productive debate while they examine their racial differences.

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[51] Mendelson, "Everything Must be Argued," 40.

[52] Osborn, "Archetypal Metaphor in Rhetoric," 117.

[53] Robert Rowland, "Barack Obama and the Revitalization of Public Reason," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 14, no. 2 (2011): 693-726.

[54] Rowland, "Barack Obama," 719.

[55] Adam Nagourney, "Obama Takes Iowa in a Big Turnout as Clinton Falters," *New York Times*, January 4, 2008; Scott Helman, "Obama Wins Racially Polarized Mississippi," *Boston Globe*, March 11, 2008.

[56] Rowland and Jones, "Recasting the American Dream and America's Politics," 427.

[57] Rowland and Jones, "Recasting the American Dream and America's Politics," 442.

[58] Robert L. Ivie and Oscar Giner, "American Exceptionalism in a Democratic Idiom: Transacting the Mythos of Change in the 2008 Presidential Campaign," *Communication Studies* 60, no. 4 (2009): 360.

Contextual Limitations of Obama's Pedagogy

While metaphor helped Obama emotionally validate the concerns of many Americans in "A More Perfect Union" and the Trayvon Martin speech, news media largely criticized his "more cautionary" and "less empathetic" response to Michael Brown.[59] Obama's remarks following the acquittal of Darren Wilson demonstrate the contextual constraints and limitations of each speaking occasion. While "A More Perfect Union" called into question Obama's own personal ethos, and Martin concerned the actions of a private citizen, George Zimmerman, Obama had to tread carefully following the events in Missouri. With less at stake, it was easy for Obama to respond to Wright and Zimmerman more directly. Zimmerman, a private citizen, and Wright, a religious official, did not represent government institutions. While controversia would be an appropriate and desirable outcome of the Ferguson speech, Obama could not employ a pedagogical approach without implicating wrongdoing of a government official and institution. That Obama has more recently remained mum about Walter Scott and Freddie Gray provides reaffirmation as both incidents involved state and local police forces.[60] Ferguson, like Baltimore, presented a conflict of interest for Obama, because to indict Wilson or law enforcement in Missouri and Maryland more generally would undermine the actions of a democratic institution and the white patriarchal system that orders our government.

Despite Obama's choice to avert a pedagogical strategy, the Ferguson speech begins with the possibility for controversia. In the proem of the speech Obama acknowledges the potential for dissent: "It's an outcome that, either way, was going to be subject of intense disagreement not only in Ferguson, but across America."[61] While these opening remarks affirm the Ciceronian requirement for "argumentation that accommodates multiplicity,"[62] Obama quickly digresses from producing a dialogical exchange. Rather than acknowledge and validate the specific variance in opinion elicited by the trial outcome as he did after Martin and in response to Wright, Obama characterizes Ferguson as a more general and ambiguous problem for America. Shortly after his initial remarks, he states, "[w]e need to recognize that this is not just an issue for Ferguson, this is an issue for America" (1). The binary characterizations that made "A More Perfect Union" and Martin ripe for pedagogy yield to a strategy that allows Obama to generalize without condemning the actions of Wilson or Ferguson's police force.

Rather than condemn state and local authorities, as with Florida, Obama defends government institutions and America's criminal justice system: "First and foremost, we are a nation built on the rule of law. And so we need to accept that this decision was the grand jury's to make" (1). Shortly after, he states, "our police officers put their lives on the line for us every single day. They've got a tough job to do to maintain public safety and hold accountable those who break

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[59] Nedra Pickler, "Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown Shootings Get Different Obama Reactions," *Northwest Herald*, November 25, 2014; Christi Parsons and Kathleen Hennessy, "President Obama Chooses his Words Carefully on Michael Brown," *LA Times*, August 18, 2014; Joe Williams, "President Obama's Statement on the Shooting of Michael Brown," *Blue Nation Review*, August 12, 2014.

[60] It should be noted that Obama did make a public statement following Gray's death and the ensuing violence in Baltimore on April 28, 2015. His comments, however, resonate with his speech following Brown as Obama used both occasions to condemn violent protest rather than validate and acknowledge racial sentiment.

[61] Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President After Announcement of the Decision by the Grand Jury in Ferguson, Missouri," November 24, 2014, *WhiteHouse.gov*, https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/11/24/remarks-president-after-announcement-decision-grand-jury-ferguson-missou. Future references will be made by page number parenthetically.

[62] Mendelson, "Everything Must be Argued," 17.

the law" (1). While it would have been appropriate to indict Wilson's protocol for lack of judgment, Obama sympathizes with the hasty decisions law enforcement sometimes makes.

The entire Ferguson speech can be read as a polemic against the likelihood of local violent protest and as an attempt to diffuse America on a broader level. Early in the speech, Obama notes, "I join Michael's parents in asking anyone who protests this decision to do so peacefully" (1). Soon after, he continues, "I also appeal to the law enforcement officials in Ferguson and the region to show care and restraint in managing peaceful protests that may occur" (1). In this proleptic moment, Obama foresees the likelihood of contempt beyond Ferguson, which his statement about "the region" suggests. In turn, he advocates peaceful protest, nonviolent resistance, as King would have it.

Most striking is Obama's optimism about racial progress. "We have made enormous progress in race relations over the course of the past several decades," Obama argues, "I've witnessed that in my own life" (1). "And to deny that progress," he continues, "is to deny America's capacity for change" (1). While he starts to acknowledge the sentiment of many populations of color, he reduces Ferguson to an isolated incident. "[T]here are still problems and communities of color are not making these problems up," Obama charges, and "there are issues in which the law too often feels as if it is being applied in discriminatory fashion" (1). However, Obama states, "I don't think that's the norm. I don't think that's true for the majority of communities or . . . law enforcement officials" (1). His solution is vague at best: "What we need to do is understand them and figure out how do we make more progress" (1). While progress may be the objective, Obama's response to Ferguson falls short in comparison to "A More Perfect Union" and the Trayvon Martin speech. While Obama does acknowledge oppositional sentiment, he resigns the notion that police engage in discriminatory practices to the realm of minority opinion. Obama's failure to remain objective complicates the possibility for controversia, and thus fails to provide listeners a catalyst for deliberation.

At a time when the continued punctuation of events that expose racial unrest seems inevitable, it is likely that even in the twilight of his presidential career Obama will again be called to publicly weigh in on the status of racial inequality. Rather than indict Obama for failing to institute racial progress, however, we should use these moments to examine his discourse as a pedagogical and rhetorical heuristic that holds the capacity for meaningful and productive conversations to transpire. Even in the absence of pedagogy in Obama's response to Ferguson, the speech helps illuminate the limitations of controversia as a rhetorical strategy. Taken together, the racial moment speeches reveal that controversia is a strategy ill equipped to address racial controversies that occur under the oversight of public and democratic institutions.

Obama's pedagogical approach is insightful for citizens and scholars. On the one hand, it demonstrates how metaphors, which we typically resign to the figurative realm, have the potential to create instructive and educational ends for audiences. On the other hand, it provides a new and under-utilized critical framework through which to view Obama's discourse. Obama's use of paradox to address racial conflict challenges the characterization of his discourse as inclusive, and can help us better understand how metaphor functions through binaries. When employed rhetorically paradox demonstrates the ways in which metaphor can transcend the symbolic realm as a conduit to facilitate public dialogue. Obama's use of metaphor does more than teach us about the existence of racial sentiment that manifests in binary form, and more than simply guide the ways in which audiences think about racial inequality; it opens up a dialogic space in which deliberation becomes possible. Once we step back and approach Obama's discourse with a critical understanding of what it can do, the potential for change becomes a reality.